

Mitchell Demburg

Juan García, right, with coastal villagers of Esmeraldas Province.

Born in 1944, Juan García Salazar grew up in a small village near the mouth of the Santiago River in Ecuador's Esmeraldas Province. His mother, a local woman, was black; his father, a refugee from the Spanish Civil War, was a Spaniard. When Juan was five, his father died, and his mother sent him to live with a doctor from a nearby island who promised to take care of the boy in exchange for his labor.

Forced to leave school early to earn a living, Juan is largely self-educated. He learned Italian while studying at an orphanage run by Italian priests, and he learned French while living with a French-speaking family. He has an extensive knowledge of African poetry written in French and has studied source materials on the slave trade from French West Africa. He learned research skills and anthropological techniques while working as a field assistant for several scientists. Along the way, he also has acquired some English.

Since early childhood, Juan has held one job or another. As a boy, he sailed with his mother throughout the local island estuaries as far as Tumaco to trade rice for clothing. Later, he learned carpentry. He operated a small factory in Bogotá for several years before eventually returning to Esmeraldas as a volunteer social worker and schoolteacher in the black communities along the Santiago River.

After his return to Esmeraldas, Juan became increasingly disturbed by the rapid and widespread dissolution of traditional black culture. At the heart of the tradition were décimas, an adapted form of Spanish poetry, and the decimero, the person who recited memorized poems and/or composed new ones. The personal and group experiences of generations of black Ecuadorians were embedded in this rich oral lore. Now, those voices were being drowned out by radio and television and by standardized school curricula. Since neither Ecuadorian nor foreign anthropologists had taken much interest in studying or recording this oral tradition—and since illiteracy among Blacks was high—Esmeraldas' past seemed about to disappear without a trace. So, using a tape recorder, a camera, his notebook, and his skill as an interviewer, Juan launched a one-man campaign to collect, catalog, and study examples of Afro-Ecuadorian culture.

In 1978, he received a small grant from the Central Bank of Ecuador, which helped support him while he collected décimas. A grant from the Inter-American Foundation has assisted Juan's work since 1980 on a more extensive project that includes the studying of rituals, myths, folk medicine, music, and household artifacts in Ecuador's two major black communities—Chota and Esmeraldas—and researching archives on slavery.

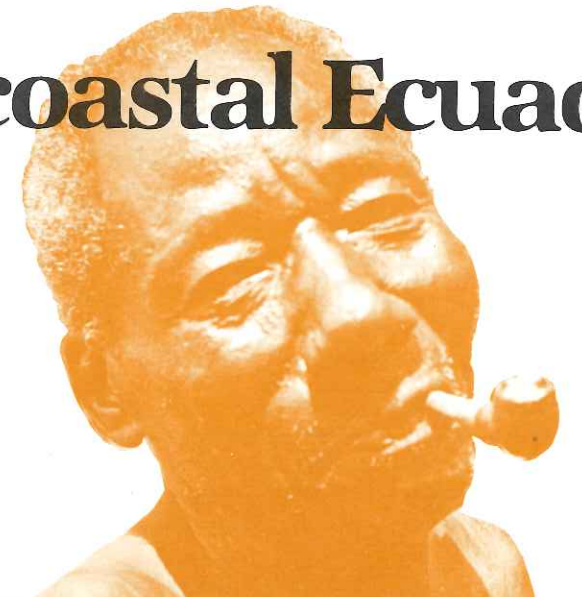
Beyond his own studies, Juan has worked hard to promote and publicize Afro-Ecuadorian culture to all of his countrymen and to Blacks in particular. He has lectured at the Banco Central in Quito, at the Military Academy, at universities, cultural centers, schools, and in peasant communities. He has also provided materials to schools and has directed a thesis, *Slavery in Ecuador*. In 1979, he gathered a group of about 15 black university students and professionals together in Quito to found the Afro-Ecuadorian Study Center. The center recently published the first of a forthcoming series of Cuadernos Afro-Ecuatorianos (*Afro-Ecuadorian Pamphlets*) to disseminate information about black-Ecuadorian culture to urban and rural Blacks.

Black slaves sailed to America with the first Spanish explorers, traveling with their masters on expeditions throughout the New World. But until 1517, when the slave trade between Africa and America began, those Blacks were born in Europe and had been Christianized. Africans were not permitted in the Americas out of fear that their religion might "contaminate" the Indian population.

After the traffic began, of course, colonists were usually contemptuous of their new slaves and their traditions, characterizing Africans as so dull-witted that there was no point in educating them or their children. In the Spanish colonies, in fact, it was illegal to teach Blacks to read or write, and oral instruction was limited

## Black poetry of coastal Ecuador

JUAN GARCIA SALAZAR





to religion and work-training.

The ability of Blacks to preserve their ancestral traditions depended not only on the moral and legal codes of their European owners, but also on the attitudes of native Indian populations, on geography, and on climate. Ecuador was a relatively benign area for the Africans, and its black communities were able to sustain much of their African heritage. African culture was also preserved by *cimarrones*, or run-away slaves, who started independent communities far beyond the reach of any owner (although in these clandestine and isolated societies, ancestral traditions were fragmented since the *cimarrones* came from different tribes). Finally, slaves were permitted to entertain themselves on certain feast days; and the music they played, the stories they told, their drums, dances, riddles, and oral poetry fused into the new syncretic culture of black America.

When slaves did maintain some of their African traditions despite the diaspora, those practices were ridiculed by other Latin Americans and were even forbidden by law. Black freedmen frequently tried to improve their status by assimilating Spanish culture, forgetting their slave past, and denying their African heritage. Those efforts to rise socially and economically usually failed, and Blacks remained in the poorest, most-deprived class. Any use of African tradition in the literature of the day was seen as proof of poor taste, and both writers and critics tried to erase all such traces. Blacks with even a rudimentary education copied the European models adopted by the local ruling class.

The Negritude Movement, which began in Paris during the 1930's among black students from the French colonies of Africa, paved the way for acceptance of black poetry by educated Latin Americans. Black poetry was also promoted by a shift in Latin American literature that took place during the late 19th century. Many writers began to search for national identity and a "continental awareness" to protest the social injustices that were inherited from Spanish colonialism. The

fate of Blacks came to be seen as an integral part of the history of that oppression, and the new attitude helped legitimize black literature as an art form.

The literature of black Ecuadorians has centered on oral poetry. It has been given the Spanish name of *décima*, although its form is very different from the classic composition created by Vicente Espinel in the 16th century. The Spanish *décima* is a stanza with 10 lines of eight syllables each and a strict rhyme scheme of *abbaaccddc*. The American *décima* found in Ecuador is a poem that begins with a *redondilla* (a four-line stanza) that is composed of the last lines of the four 10-line stanzas that follow. Generally, rhyme and meter are looser in the American version.

The American *décima* is a child of both African and Hispanic culture. Of course the language is Spanish, as is the original form, and Christian motifs frequently appear in the poems. But it is Africa which provided the framework that explains why these poems have been so important to Ecuadorian Blacks. In Africa, there were two kinds of poets: chroniclers and storytellers (or balladeers). In both cases the poetry was oral. The poet was required to memorize poems that had been handed down and also to compose new ones. The chronicler was a highly respected person who knew by heart the genealogy of the village or clan chief, recounted heroic deeds, and recorded the customs of the group. Chronicles often stretched back to the creation of the world, and chroniclers were consulted as though they were living libraries. The balladeer, or storyteller, on the other hand, was known for his wit as well as his memory. Balladeers preserved the proverbs, the stories, and the anecdotal history of the group. They also performed in public literary duels that tested each poet's ability to compose spontaneous, sometimes barbed, verse.

In Ecuador, the *decimero* (the reciter of *décimas*) is both chronicler and balladeer. A *decimero* may compose his own poetry or the *décimas* may be handed down, but the language is highly figurative and rhythmic to make memorization easier

and to display artistic mastery. The style feels African, and traditional African themes are often used.

Basically, there are two kinds of *décimas*: those that deal with the "human" and those that deal with the "divine." *Décimas a lo divino* have their roots in Catholicism, the only religion the slaves could safely practice. Catholicism not only promised the slaves a better world to come, but by devoutly embracing their masters' religion, slaves gained their masters' confidence. Even today, *decimeros* receive special status for their knowledge of the Bible. The subjects of divine *décimas* range widely: from tender evocations of Jesus, to meditations on original sin, to speculations about the end of the world.



*Décimas a lo humano* range across the whole social life of coastal Blacks. In these poems, the poet can interpret and narrate his community's experience. Many *décimas* recount historical events—often the community's only historical record. Other poems are satirical—pricking pompous politicians, Hispanic culture, or local attitudes. Some *décimas* are simply good stories—flights of fantasy.

Ecuador's black poets also engage in *argumentos*, or poetic duels. The duels use the *décima* form, and also focus either on the divine (*argumentos a lo divino*) or the human (*argumentos a lo humano*). One *decimero* recites a poem, and the next poet must respond. Grounded in spontaneity, these literary faceoffs challenge the competing poets' verbal dexterity, their wit, and their knowledge of the Bible and secular subjects (even such unlikely ones as mathematics). *Argumentos* are full of flash and thunder, and they provide a forum where younger poets can also display their talents.

For the past seven years, I have been taperecording and transcribing *décimas*. More recently, I focused my research on Esmeraldas and Imbabura Provinces, which have the two largest black populations.

Since there is no living *decimero* tradition in the Chota Valley of Imbabura, my field assistants and I did our actual *décima*-collecting in Esmeraldas. We divided the province into two sections that we visited for 10 months each. The northern zone ran from Rio Verde in the south to San Lorenzo in the north and included the Santiago and Onzole Rivers. In this area we studied seven key communities: La Tola, Limones, San Lorenzo, Playa de Oro, Izquandé, Rio Verde, and Chontaduro. These communities are about 20 kilometers from each other. Some are located on the coast while others are situated along the rivers. The northern region is very difficult to reach, and the influence of modern culture is less apparent. As a result, the old ways are more purely intact. All of the *decimeros* we found who also composed their own poetry came from this area.



The southern zone extended from Rio Grande in the north to the Muisne River in the south and included the Quinindé River. Here there were larger towns, such as Esmeraldas and Quinindé, and more modern forms of communication. The area is a center for commerce and tourism. Not surprisingly, authentic traditions are being lost more quickly here, and there are no more decimeros who compose their own work. We visited many settlements but found decimeros who could recite the older décimas only in Esmeraldas, Quinindé, Atacames, and Muisne.

As soon as we heard of a decimero in either the north or south, we would visit him. First we would chat and ask about his background: his age, place of birth, job, and so forth. Then we would ask him to talk about his work as a decimero. Did he compose or only recite? Where had he learned his décimas? Where was he known? Finally, the decimero would recite some of the work he knew so that it could be recorded on cassettes. We could not ask the poets to write down their décimas since almost all of the reciters were illiterate.

Once the material was collected, décimas had to be transcribed while taking care to preserve the idioms, the metaphors, and the new words coined by each decimero. Afterwards, it seemed like a good idea to prepare a glossary so that the poems would be more accessible to the general reader.

Altogether, we collected about 300 décimas and interviewed about 20 decimeros. A representative anthology of these poems and an analysis of the tradition were recently published by the Banco del Ecuador, which will make the work more available to the Ecuadorian public. Ironically though, even as we began making a written record, the end of the tradition

seemed nearer. We found only about half-a-dozen young decimeros, and the radio is displacing oral poetry in even the remotest areas.

I do not believe that my collection of décimas will reverse or stop any of these trends. Preservation of the past, however, has opened up some new possibilities for the future. A wealth of information has been gathered which has, in turn, spawned books and even dissertations on black culture in Ecuador. Some of the décimas may be used by the Ministry of Culture as basic educational material in the schools and in adult literacy programs. The décimas can also be used more informally by small study groups that form around an interest in black culture. Even the radio, which thus far has been a nega-

tive force, could play a part in maintaining oral traditions. There are cultural programs that need suitable materials to broadcast, and the décimas are there, waiting to be used. Finally, black Ecuadorians now will be able to refer to their own established and written record of a legitimate tradition of literature. Pride in past accomplishments strengthens self-respect and lays the groundwork for future development.





COMPLAINT AGAINST THE  
RAILROAD

There's a complaint before the judge,  
the judge of the circuit court:  
the train has killed some boys  
along the railroad track.

"Come here, Mr. Railroad,"  
His Honor called aloud,  
"Why did you kill the boys  
who were only walking around?"  
"Oh sir, I don't kill anyone,  
they make me—it's the truth.  
The boys just ask for trouble,  
they always look for death,  
and I don't care if people  
complain before the judge."

There's a brakeman on the train,  
you'd think he'd look around  
for guys standing on the track  
so he won't run them down.  
He should stop the train right away  
and not just let it race,  
for the life of any man  
is worth a lot to the state,  
and this complaint's been brought  
before the circuit judge.

If this is true then I  
can save Railroad some strife;  
nobody is to blame  
if a man throws away his life.  
The railroad runs along  
its track in a race against time;  
and if the brakeman wanted to,  
he just couldn't stop on a dime.  
The train just couldn't stop  
along the railroad track.

## LET'S ALL GET TOGETHER

Let's all get together  
all of us in Limones  
and ask the Health Department  
to get rid of the rats.

People are in trouble:  
a huge army of rats  
eats up all our food  
and even scares the cats.  
No animal is as smart  
as the wily, clever rat.  
No trap can catch him  
and he's growing very fat.  
All of us in Limones  
let's all get together.

One day a woman said  
"I've lost a bar of soap."  
Later she found out that  
it and a rat eloped.  
A perfumed bar of soap,  
what could they want it for?  
They can't eat the soap,  
and never wash, I'm sure.  
Let's all get together  
all of us in Limones.

I bought a basket of corn  
and left it out alone.  
The next day—not even husks—  
the kernels were all gone.  
Everything was eaten;  
the rats had made their meal  
right there in the basket.  
Get rid of the rats. That's all!  
Let's ask the Health Department.

I haven't finished telling  
my story without end.  
Rats swarm throughout the world  
you can't get rid of them.  
By day the coward-rat hides,  
he goes inside a cave;  
he only comes out at night—  
that's when a rat is brave!  
Let's ask the Health Department  
to get rid of the rats.

## THE COW FLEW IN A PLANE

The cow flew in a plane  
to the Port of Buenaventura  
because here in Tumaco  
the poverty was so bad.

She left for Panama  
on yet another plane  
and had them pull a tooth—  
she couldn't stand the pain.  
She had pains 'round her heart,  
she wanted an examination.  
They couldn't find a cure,  
she wanted an operation,  
and for these mysterious reasons  
the cow flew in a plane.

She went with the idea  
of finishing what she began,  
of finding out about  
the Korean War if she can.  
For many of the creatures  
are having a time that's rough,  
only the rich can play  
and rest and eat enough.  
But for the poor cow,  
the poverty was so bad.

When she was healthy again  
and we thought she was back to stay,  
she wanted to take a trip  
to the U.S. of A.  
to see what she could see  
in that cold place far away.  
She wanted to talk to the priests  
and to the Chief of State,  
and for these mysterious reasons  
the cow flew in a plane.

## THE BLACK GOAT

Between la Tola and Limones,  
from Limones to Borbón,  
there's a black goat walking  
and his title is Esquire.

Every Christian knows him,  
every man in the place  
knows Señor Eloy Lara.  
One quick look at his face—  
you'll know how bad he is.  
His mean and evil ways  
glare in those cold hard eyes,  
this snake with his devil's gaze  
between La Tola and Limones.

Back in 1900  
someone paid his bill—  
just when the sucker forgets it  
he gets another bill.  
The snake takes ten percent interest,  
he pushes your back to the wall  
and says to you "My friend,  
I want my money, that's all."  
And he walks, as I was saying,  
from Limones to Borbón.

How many poor unfortunates  
have paid their lives away,  
the wretches have lost their shirts  
to this serpent without shame!  
That's how he treated Valencia  
and poor Severo, the clod,  
and that's why Quintero said  
"We can only leave him to God."  
And with his rapid step  
there's a black goat walking.

I wish that God were willing  
to send a tidal wave  
that would sweep the snake out to sea  
and drown him, the dirty knave.  
Everything he does is evil,  
no man would feel any grief  
because nobody has any love  
for that shyster lawyer thief  
who mistreats everyone of us.  
And his title is Esquire.

## THE BLACK MAN'S QUESTION

Like the ignorant man I am  
I really have to ask:  
if the color white is a virtue  
why don't you whiten me?

It's no insult to be black,  
don't let it give you the blues,  
even society ladies  
wear their shiny black shoes...  
and black eyebrows and black lashes  
and beautiful long black hair.  
Let anyone here explain,  
my question is very fair.  
I really have to ask  
like the ignorant man I am.

I ask without hesitation,  
it's something I don't understand:  
when the Lord who made us all  
mixed His water and sand,  
what color clay did He use  
to give father Adam shape?  
And if you want to shut me up  
first answer—I'll shut my trap.  
Like the ignorant man I am  
I really have to ask.

I ask (because I want to)  
if being black is a crime.  
I've never seen white letters  
since the beginning of time.  
Christ's holy cross was black,  
that's where our Savior died,  
and Mother Mary wore black  
when Her Son Jesus died.  
I really have to ask  
if the color white is a virtue.

The black man with his blackness  
and the white man with his white,  
all of us come to our end  
in the tomb as black as night.  
Then, the beauty of white ladies  
will end from pole to pole,  
and the critic will be finished  
and the man as black as coal.  
If the color white is a virtue,  
why don't you whiten me?

*JUAN GARCIA SALAZAR's book, La poesía negra en el Ecuador, (Esmeraldas: Banco Central del Ecuador, 1982), and further information can be obtained by writing to: Cuadernos Afro-Ecuatorianos, Apartado 6432, CCI Quito, Ecuador. Poems and text for this article were translated into English by Edith Grossman, a poet and translator who lives in New York. Photographs are by Juan García.*

